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Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

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Report on the Colloquium on Contemporary Argentina

Held at the School of International Service, The American University

Washington, DC, 23-24 May 1979

Prepared by Dr. Jack Child, Rapporteur

I. Overview

On 23-24 May 1979 a Colloquium on Contemporary Argentina was held, with support from the State Department, at the School of International Service of the American University. Participants included a broad range of individuals from U.S. and foreign academic circles, government, international organizations and development agencies as well as private individuals with an interest in Argentina.

Four sessions were scheduled, each devoted to a major topic: political development, foreign relations, economics and human rights. The first two involved formal papers followed by comments by a panel of discussants and questions from the floor. The third session (economics) consisted of brief presentations by four economists (two from academe and two from international lending agencies). The last session dealt with human rights and was relatively unstructured, with a lively exchange of informal views among all interested participants.

II. Some General Themes

Although there was no attempt to reach conclusions or consensus, some general themes did emerge in the two days of presentations and discussions. There was, for example, quick and easy agreement on some rather self-evident points:

- Argentina is a complex and enigmatic nation, resistant to simplistic analyses, superficial understandings or reductionist approaches.
- Argentina is inadequately studied and understood in the United States.
- Argentina's problems are basically of her own making; by the same token

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solutions imposed from the outside are likely to have only marginal (and perhaps even counter-productive) effects.

The main thrust of the Colloquium focused on a series of general questions dealing with contemporary Argentina in terms of the four approaches: political, international, economic, and human rights. Several of these questions, and the discussion they generated, are summarized below.

1. Why has Argentina not fully realized its outstanding human, economic, political and international potential?

a. The intransigent explanation: because Argentines, collectively as well as individually, tend to be uncompromising and are not team players. Thus, when an Argentine is not in control, there is a tendency for him to withhold cooperation or block effective action by those who are in control.

b. The "excessive expectation" explanation: because Argentines have been blessed with impressive resources (the human element, the Pampa), and they therefore expect too much and become frustrated and cynical when goals are not quickly achieved.

c. The uncertainty explanation: because changes have come too fast and too frequently ("Porteño Future Shock"), and the resulting uncertainty inhibits decisive action.

d. The "misplaced goal" explanation: because Argentines have tended to concentrate on grandiose holistic solutions (the "proyecto nacional", the "growth model", the grand scheme, macro analysis) instead of the more effective and pragmatic micro approach.

2. Why is Argentina seemingly in a constant state of crisis?

a. The intransigent explanation (see above).

b. The exclusionist explanation: because groups in power tend to exclude all opponents from participation in government.

c. The "dark side" explanation: because of a tendency towards violence and "revancha" which makes conciliation and agreement very difficult.

d. The class struggle explanation: this vision of Argentine history sees a constant conflict between conservative oligarchs, populist urban labor and bourgeoisie middle class elements, with little chance of compromise.

e. The oscillation explanation: this vision presents Argentine history as a series of violent and extreme oscillations between excessive populism (which leads to chaos and violence) and excessive authoritarianism (which leads to repression and violence). Each extreme tends to create conditions which lead to the other extreme.

3. Why are Argentines different? (Note: there was not complete agreement that they are in fact different).

a. The ethnic explanation: because they believe themselves to be transplanted Europeans rather than South Americans.

b. The geographic explanation: because of the sense of isolation imposed by distance from the Northern Hemisphere.

c. The triangular rivalry explanation: because of a special sense of rivalry with Brazil and the United States.

d. The economic explanation: because of a unique set of economic features (strong agricultural base, skilled manpower for industrialization, etc) which sets Argentina apart from the rest of the sub-Continent.

III. Some Political Considerations

The topic of internal political development was well represented in the discussion of the general themes noted above, but there was additional discussion of some specific political considerations, especially the role of new and

changing political actors:

1. The military, who were variously seen as intervening politically for their own narrow goals, for national salvation at the invitation of desperate civilians, or for a set of complex motivations which are sometimes contradictory.
2. A middle-class techno-bureaucratic elite, seen as allied with the military in a push for development.
3. Urban labor, now increasingly cynical and apathetic, and mainly concerned with an individual struggle for survival.
4. Violence and its perpetrators as major political actors functioning with a bizarre and uncontrollable logic of their own.

IV. Some Foreign Relations Considerations

There was rather surprising agreement that Argentine foreign policy has been remarkably consistent over the years, despite seemingly sharp changes in direction. These changes in direction were described as being more in form than in content (or, as one discussant put it, "more bark than bite").

The major theme in Argentine foreign policy was presented as a search for autonomy in the face of the reality of dependence (economic as well as political) in a fairly rigid international block structure.

The Peronist Tercera Posición was seen as an extreme case of the search for autonomy (although there were dissenters who argued that the autonomy sought by Perón was more apparent than real); the links between the Tercera Posición and today's non-aligned movement were also explored along with the suggestion that Argentina, and nations like her, might have answers to global problems which have escaped solution by the superpowers.

V. Some Economic Considerations

The session devoted to economics included many of the general themes mentioned previously, as well as the following specific topics:

1. Two panelists presented an economic analysis of the first Perón Administration (1945-1955) and the current Administration (1976-date) in terms of the economic challenges and specific conditions, the proposed solutions, and an assessment of the effectiveness of those solutions.

2. Two panelists discussed Argentine economics in terms of the protectionist-structuralist approach and its antithesis, the free-play monetarist (IMF) approach. Particular attention was paid to the historic Argentine tendency to protect its industry, and to the social and political costs of stabilization campaigns, especially those attempting to deal with inflation.

3. Discussion also focused on the obstacles to Argentine economic growth. A number of such obstacles were identified; among the most noteworthy were:

- intransigence (discussed previously).
- the impact of sudden, dramatic and frequent shifts of government economic policy and the resulting uncertainty.
- the damaging effects of misplaced protectionism.
- migration and the "brain drain".
- excessive emphasis on the macro approach (the grand schemes for development) at the expense of the micro (pragmatic subsector analysis).

VI. The Human Rights Debate

As indicated above, the session devoted to the impact of the human rights issue on contemporary Argentina was the least structured (ie, no formal papers or presentations) and the most lively. While the discussions were generally calm

and objective, this issue clearly involved deep-seated emotions which occasionally surfaced.

One issue which was addressed initially was the question of whether human rights were universal, general, and equally applicable to all cultures, societies, political systems, security situations and time periods, or were they relative to particular conditions and environments.

While there was no attempt made to present official governmental positions on either side, at the Chair's request the United States position on human rights was expressed as follows:

a. There are indeed universal human rights, as embodied in certain unanimously accepted documents such as the United Nations General Assembly Declaration of Human Rights and the Charter of the Organization of American States.

b. The United States categorizes human rights as follows:

- Human rights dealing with the integrity of the person.
- Socio-economic human rights.
- Civil and political human rights.

c. United States foreign policy has always had a human rights component, but the Carter Administration has dramatically increased its priority.

d. In the U.S. foreign policy decision-making process human rights interests sometimes conflict with other interests, such as security, economic, access to resources, etc. The resulting compromises are sometimes interpreted abroad as deep contradictions, which they are not.

e. The U.S. human rights approach, while attacked by many governments (especially in Latin America) is generally supported and admired by the people in these same countries.

This statement of the United States position produced a spirited discussion and criticism which centered on the following questions:

a. The "why now?" question brought out:

- suspicion that the current U.S. human rights emphasis stems more from internal U.S. political needs rather than genuine moral concerns.
- apprehension that the Carter Administration's human rights thrust is a temporary and unsettlingly brief moralistic policy which will soon be abandoned or sharply reduced in priority.
- suggestions that these policies are not an end in themselves but rather are opportunistic means to achieve other U.S. foreign policy goals.

b. The "what are the limits?" question focused on:

- the double standard of heavy U.S. emphasis on human rights in Latin America and a more cautious approach in areas where U.S. vital interests are at stake (ie, Iran, Korea, Philippines).
- the contradiction of U.S. human rights moralization in the face of U.S. failure to ratify the major international human rights conventions.

c. The "what are the best means to insure human rights?" question, which addressed the issues of:

- the possible negative impact of direct and public U.S. pressures and the probable reaction in light of historic Argentine intransigence.
- the problem of intervention and violation of national sovereignty through human rights policies.

Other dimensions of the issue included:

- a. A criticism of international organizations for loudly proclaiming adherence to human rights principles when they themselves violate them.

b. A belief that human rights principles cannot be effectively fulfilled until the existing international system is fundamentally restructured to remove basic injustices.

c. An emotional appeal to avoid the irrelevant issues of abstract principles, international law and national sovereignty and focus on the real issue of how to reduce the incidents of torture, kidnapping, and violent death.

VII. A Look at the Future

Perceptions of the future expressed by participants in the Colloquium fell generally into the following categories:

1. The pessimists (seemingly a majority) who saw no real hope for a change from the pattern of frustration, malaise, and perpetual crisis, or any possibility of basic national conciliation after the violence of the past decade.
2. The extreme pessimists, who predicted a chaotic self-destruction of the system which could be avoided only by increasing repression, terror and counter-terror.
3. The cautious optimists who saw signs of more responsible political actors, of more rational economic policies, and of a willingness among the military to withdraw from the active political scene.
4. The unexpectedists, who pointed out that Argentina had come up with surprising developments in the past (Peronismo was given as an example) and might do so again.